

IJCIR

המועצה היהודית הישראלית ליהסם ביןדתיים Israel Jewish Council for Interreligious Relations

The following remarks were written by Dr. Deborah Weissman who consented to be ready to take the place of Rabbi Alon Goshen-Gottstein if his health prevented his participation. IJCIR is happy that Alon is with us and also appreciative of Debbie's efforts. We thought that her remarks would be of interest to the audience as well.

In responding to this important document, what I will present is, of course, a Jewish response and not the Jewish response.

I'm not a Bible scholar, but I am a practicing Jew engaged in interfaith dialogue. My main qualification, I believe, for speaking this evening is that, as a doctor of Jewish education, I have taught for the past seven years, intensively, and for about twelve years before that somewhat less so, at various Christian institutions in Jerusalem. These include, under Roman Catholic and/or ecumenical auspices, Tantur, Ecce Homo, *Bat Kol*, the Pontifical Biblical Institute, as well as others under Protestant auspices. It has been my privilege to have taught both Biblical and post-Biblical Jewish texts to many hundreds and perhaps even a few thousand Christians, from around the world.

What we are discussing this evening is one of several ground-breaking documents issued by the Church since Vatican II. For Jews, I believe that statements like *Nostra Aetate*, "We Remember" and the current one, are an exemplary case of *metanoia*, of transformation, or as our tradition calls it, *teshuvah*. We welcome these documents and applaud them. Clearly, there is still much pastoral and educational work to be done before we can say that these insights not only are official church doctrine but also form the backbone of Catholic education, from the elementary level to the seminary. I of course will leave it to my colleague and friend Daniel Rossing to talk about the local scene. But I know from my teaching experience that different regions of the world have been affected differentially by these changes, as well as different groups, movements, orders within each region.

We Jews have a long way to go in order to respond in kind. There has been a document, as many of you know, called *Dabru Emet*. But even those of us who feel that perhaps we would like to go further in our response must first acknowledge that the biggest problem with *Dabru Emet* is the tiny percentage of Jews in the world who have even heard of it. We Jews have a lot of educating to do, in order to modify

the perceptions of Christians and Christianity, in our education, both in Israel and abroad. In recognizing the sincere transformation which has been undertaken by many Christians, we should undertake our own process of going through classical Jewish texts and teachings regarding the Other. Some of these teachings may be contextualized historically or re-interpreted; others should be seen as part of an ongoing internal debate, in which we take sides. In our own day, we must, I believe, take the side of rejecting racism and sexism. As was suggested by my former teacher, Professor Moshe Greenberg, a Bible scholar at the Hebrew University:

"Even the choicest vine needs seasonal pruning to ensure more fruitful growth."

Now, I don't suppose that His Eminence planned his visit to the Holy Land around the weekly cycle of Torah readings. But, fortuitously, last *Shabbat*, we read the portion called *Vayera*, which included Genesis 21, the exile of Hagar and Ishmael, and this coming *Shabbat* we will read *Parshat Chayei Sarah*, Genesis 23 through 25, culminating in the marriage of Isaac and Rebecca, the parents of Esau and Jacob. In our tradition, Esau has been a symbol of Christendom. So this is an appropriate week in which to reflect upon our relationships with both the children of Ishmael and the children of Esau.

I want to return to the document at hand and offer several more comments, from a Jewish perspective. I recognize that to do justice to the depth and breadth of this document we would need a seminar of at least a semester, if not a full year:

1) What is most fortunate and deeply appreciated is the rejection of supersessionism and the recognition of the ongoing nature of the Jewish Covenant with God. I learned from my dear friend Father David Neuhaus, a Jesuit Bible scholar, not to be offended by the use of the term, "Old Testament." He said that old can mean, as in the case of an old computer, something that is obsolete and that should be discarded. Or, as in the case of an old friend, something you love and cherish. Still, other Christians have suggested using "Shared Testament" or "First Testament."

2) I'd like to challenge my Catholic friends to carry their openness just a bit further. The Almighty, says Professor David Hartman, is infinite, universal, Creator of heaven and earth. But we mortals are finite and limited. How do finite human beings worship an infinite God? Through particular frameworks—particular faiths, cultures, languages, histories and covenants. Whereas the God of Creation is Universal, the God of Revelation assumes a particular character. In each of our traditions, we must develop a theology of the Other, a framework for recognizing that no one human tradition or community possesses

the exclusive truth. As 20th century Jewish philosopher and mystic Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook wrote, "Some err and think that world peace can be built only through total consensus...But the truth is that real peace, on the contrary, can come to the world only through precisely the multiplicity of peace, and this is when all sides and opinions come to light, and are proven to each have their own place." Now Rabbi Kook died before the Holocaust. Had he lived longer, he might have amended his position to exclude certain sides and opinions; I don't know. I believe that there are limits to pluralism, and I'm certainly not arguing for a nihilistic relativism. But I am arguing, using the terminology of anthropologist Anthony Wallace, that what we need in society is not "the replication of uniformity, but the organization of diversity."

3) There's a book I often recommend, by a Christian scholar named Thomas Cahill. The book came out in 1998 and was called, *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels*. It discusses certain significant contributions of Biblical Judaism, such as the notion of the unity of God, ethical monotheism, the Sabbath, prophecy, etc. But the book ends with the Babylonian exile. When I read it, I asked, "Where is the next volume?" If I were writing such a book, it would probably have at least three volumes and perhaps more. What about all of the post-Biblical flourishing of Jewish creativity? I must say that one of the sentences in our document which most resonated with me was "On the practical level of exegesis, Christians can...learn much from Jewish exegesis practiced for more than two thousand years..." Taking the implications of this statement seriously would entail a re-thinking of the Christian approach to Rabbinic Judaism in general and the Pharisees in particular. It has been my privilege to share with my Christian students some exposure—often, their first, to *Midrash, Mishnah, Talmud*. It is always exciting to introduce those methods of reading and interpreting texts that open up new possibilities. One of my Jewish students once said that he, a secular Jew, loves learning *Talmud* because it shows him the almost infinite potential for human interpretation of text. My Christian students who have learned the method of *Midrash* have found it not only useful but sometimes even spiritually exhilarating. Again quoting HaRav Rook, "Just as there are laws of poetry, so can there be poetry within law."

But learning from our Oral Torah—perhaps our equivalent of Tradition, as distinguished from Scripture, in the terms of the document, --can be important in another way, as well: It helps to create a culture of discourse and debate. My colleagues, Dr. Shlomo Fischer, who has been associated with the Van Leer Institute, and Professor Suzanne Last Stone, of

Yeshiva University in New York, have suggested that there are several "characteristics of Judaism that support pluralism and acceptance of diversity." One of these is, in their words, "the tradition of intellectual pluralism within the normative halakhic community fostered by its skeptical approach to truth-claims." Another is "the internal structure of Judaism—its limitation to one nation—which has led to a positive valuation of the role of other collectivities in the divine plan." I would simply amend that to read not necessarily that it has led to a positive valuation, but that it could.

To be fair, I should add that historically, and to some extent, today, as well, some Jews consider it sinful to teach the Oral Torah to non-Jews. I don't know what came first—the Christian rejection of Rabbinic interpretation or this Jewish reluctance to share it with them. Perhaps the two developed together, in an atmosphere of mutual hostility. But many of the Jews who will not teach the Oral Torah to Gentiles would also consider it sinful to teach the Oral Torah to women. I thank God for living in an age when, with all of our problems, we also have the blessing of opening up the wellsprings of Torah to men and women, Jews, Christians, and other human beings created in God's image.

Jews and Christians have much to gain from studying from, and with, each other. But, as our tradition teaches, study is important when it leads to action.

And so, in conclusion, I would like to bring from this document a quotation from the late Pope John Paul II, of blessed memory, on his visit to Israel over seven and a half years ago, during the course of which he addressed Israel's Chief Rabbis in these terms: "We (Jews and Christians) must work together to build a future in which there will be no more anti-Jewish feeling among Christians, or any anti-Christian feeling among Jews. We have many things in common. We can do much for the sake of peace, for a more human and more fraternal world". To which I can add only: "Amen, *Insh'allah, ken y'hi ratzon.*"